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ABSTRACT

Ways in which schools can handle student discipline problems are described in this Digest, which asserts that effective strategies aim to encourage responsible behavior and provide all students with a satisfying school experience. The document outlines the school characteristics associated with discipline problems, examines ways to decrease disruptive and increase positive student behavior, discusses the role of administrative leadership, and describes ways to develop and implement a schoolwide discipline plan. (Contains 12 references.) (LMI)

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School Discipline

by Joan Gaustad

School discipline has two main goals: (1) ensure the safety of staff and students, and (2) create an environment conducive to learning. Serious student misconduct involving violent or criminal behavior defeats these goals and often makes headlines in the process. However, the commonest discipline problems involve noncriminal student behavior (Moles 1989).

These less dramatic problems may not threaten personal safety, but they still negatively affect the learning environment. Disruptions interrupt lessons for all students, and disruptive students lose even more learning time. For example, Gottfredson and others (1989) calculate that in six middle schools in Charleston, South Carolina, students lost 7,932 instructional days—44 years!—to in-school and out-of-school suspensions in a single academic year.

It is important to keep the ultimate goal in mind while working to improve school discipline. As education researcher Daniel Duke (1989) points out, "the goal of good behavior is necessary, but not sufficient to ensure academic growth." Effective school discipline strategies seek to encourage responsible behavior and to provide all students with a satisfying school experience as well as to discourage misconduct.

What School Characteristics Are Associated with Discipline Problems?

When Johns Hopkins University researchers Gary D. Gottfredson and Denise C. Gottfredson analyzed data from over 600 of the nation's secondary schools, they found that the following school characteristics were associated with discipline problems: Rules were unclear or perceived as unfairly or inconsistently enforced; students did not believe in the rules; teachers and administrators did not know what the rules were or disagreed on the proper responses to student misconduct; teacher-administration cooperation was poor or the administration inactive; teachers tended to have punitive attitudes; misconduct was ignored; and schools were large or lacked adequate resources for teaching (cited in Gottfredson 1989).

After reviewing dozens of studies on student behavior, Duke agreed with many of the Gottfredsons' conclusions. Orderly schools, he noted, usually balance clearly established and communicated rules with a climate of concern for students as individuals, and small alternative schools often maintain order successfuliy with fewer formal rules and a more flexible approach to infractions than large schools typically have.

How Can Schools Decrease Disruptive Behavior?

Working to change the above-mentioned characteristics may decrease disruptive behavior. First, rules and the consequences of breaking them should be clearly specified and communicated to staff, students, and parents by such means as newsletters, student assemblies, and handbooks. Meyers and Pawlas (1989) recommend periodically restating the rules, especially after students return from summer or winter vacation.

Once rules have been communicated, fair and consistent enforcement helps maintain students' respect for the school's discipline system. Consistency will be greater when fewer individuals are responsible for enforcement. Providing a hearing process for students to present their side of the story and establishing an appeal process will also increase students' and parents' perceptions of fairness.

The Gottfredsons suggest creating smaller schools or dividing large schools into several schools-within-schools (cited in Duke). This has been done in several Portland, Oregon, middle schools that have large numbers of at-risk students. For example, as Director of Instruction Leigh Wilcox explained, Lane Middle School has been divided into three minischools, each with a complete age range of students taught by a team of teachers (telephone interview, July 10, 1992).

Discipline policies should distinguish between categories of offenses. Minor infractions may be treated flexibly, depending on the circumstances, while nonnegotiable consequences are set for serious offenses. Actual criminal offenses may be reported to the police as part of a cooperative anti-crime effort (Gaustad 1991).

How Can Schools Increase Positive Behavior?

Research has shown that social rewards such as smiling, praising, and complimenting are extremely effective in increasing desirable behavior.

Citing studies showing that students who dislike school, do poorly academically, and have limited career objectives are more likely to be disruptive, Gottfredson (1989) recommends that schools work to increase academic success for low-achievers. However, this alone is not enough. A comparison of three alternative programs for at-risk youth revealed that while achievement increased in all three, delinquent behavior decreased only in the program that also increased students' social involvement and attachment to school.

Discipline problems will be reduced if students find school enjoyable and interesting. When teachers at Wilson Elementary School in North Carolina changed their instructional practices to accommodate a variety of learning styles, discipline problems decreased dramatically.

Sometimes problem behavior occurs because students simply don't know how to act appropriately. Black and Downs (1992) urge administrators to regard disciplinary referrals as op-

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portunities to teach students valuable social skills that will promote success in future employment as well as in school. They present detailed procedures for "de-escalating disruptive behavior, obtaining and maintaining instructional control, teaching alternative behaviors, and preparing students for classroom re-entry."

How Important Is Administrative Leadership?

The principal plays an important leadership role in establishing school discipline, both by effective administration and by personal example. Principals of well-disciplined students are usually highly visible models. They engage in what Duke describes as "management by walking around," greeting students and teachers and informally monitoring possible problem areas. Effective principals are liked and respected, rather than feared, and communicate caring for students as well as willingness to impose punishment if necessary (NAESP 1983).

Duckworth (1984) found that teachers' satisfaction with school discipline policy was related to their relationship with the principal. Good communication and shared values are important elements in this relationship. Ideally, a principal should be able to create consensus among staff on rules and their enforcement. In practice, some principals create consensus by recruiting like-minded staff over the course of years (Duckworth), or by arranging transfers for teachers whose views "don't fit in with goals and plans for their school" (NAESP).

In a study involving eight Charlotte, South Carolina, middle schools, Gottfredson and others concluded that stable and supportive administrative leadership was the "overriding factor" determining whether a discipline program was effective. Schools that successfully implemented a pilot program experienced distinct improvements in discipline.

Strong district leadership can also be crucial, according to Lieutenant Steve Hollingsworth, chief of public schools police in Portland, Oregon. When violent gang activity began to emerge in Portland schools, the superintendent took strong action from the start by creating and publicly announcing firm anti-gang policies. Knowing they "had the support of the people at the top" helped school staff present a united front to this difficult challenge (cited in Gaustad).

How Should a Schoolwide Discipline Plan Be Developed and Implemented?

A school discipline plan must conform to state and federal statutes and to district policy. Meyers and Pawlas suggest that principals consult district administrators beforehand and keep them informed as a schoolwide plan is being developed. Frels and others (1990) review relevant Supreme Court decisions and present sample suspension, discipline, and drug and alcohol policies that may serve as guidelines in policy development.

A plan should be designed around the individual school's learning goals and philosophy of education (NAESP). Grossnickel and Sesko (1990) present sample discipline philosophy, goals, and objectives from which specific regulations can be derived. According to Gottfredson, if a commercially developed program is adopted it should be tailored to local conditions, as obstacles vary greatly among schools. Allowing sufficient time for implementation is also important; new disciplinary practices often fail due to unrealistic time expectations.

A uniform reporting system is an important element of a school discipline plan. Uniform reporting permits assessment of the current extent of criminal and other disciplinary incidents, helps pinpoint problem areas, and enables administrators to evaluate the success of disciplinary actions (Gaustad).

Written policies should be developed with input from everyone who will be affected by them. Teacher input is especially important because their support is crucial to a plan's success. Meyers and Pawlas note that cafeteria and custodial staff may have excellent commonsense suggestions based on their interactions with students. They also suggest consulting parent and community representatives. Student input is also desirable (NAESP).

Once developed, discipline policies must be communicated to staff, students, parents, and community. But a policy on paper is meaningless in itself. Ongoing administrative support, inservice training in new techniques, continued communication, and periodic evaluation and modification are needed to adapt a school discipline plan to the changing needs of the school community.

Resources

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